

**Board of County Commissioners
Agenda Item Summary**

Meeting Date: December 17, 2003
Bulk Item: Yes ☐ No ☒

Division: Board of County Commissioners
Department: **George R. Neugent**

AGENDA ITEM WORDING:

Discussion and direction to staff as to moving forward on the contractual agreement with Department of Environmental Protection Division of State Lands regarding a parcel of property on Big Pine Key known as the "Swimming Hole".

ITEM BACKGROUND:

PREVIOUS RELEVANT BOCC ACTION:

CONTRACT/AGREEMENT CHANGES:

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

TOTAL COST:

BUDGETED: YES ☐ NO ☐

COST TO COUNTY: \$

Source of Funds: _____

REVENUE PRODUCING: YES ☐ NO ☐ **AMT PER MONTH:** **YEAR:**

APPROVED BY: COUNTY ATTY ☐ OMB/PURCHASING ☐ RISK MANAGEMENT ☐

APPROVAL:


Commissioner GEORGE R. NEUGENT
DISTRICT II

DOCUMENTATION: INCLUDED ☒ TO FOLLOW ☐ NOT REQUIRED ☐

DISPOSITION:

AGENDA ITEM #

0-13

County of Monroe

Department of Marine Resources

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Board of County Commissioners

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Comm. George Neugent, Dist. 2

Comm. David Rice, Dist. 4

November 18, 2003

Tracy Peters, Senior Acquisition Review Agent
Department of Environmental Protection
Bureau of Public Land Administration
3900 Commonwealth Blvd.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000

Dear Ms. Peters:

Thank you for your assistance regarding Monroe County's inquiry of proposed uses of the 'swimming hole' parcel located on Big Pine Key. As per our phone conversation on 12/11/03 I am providing additional information describing the County's desire to utilize the property for a variety of recreational and conservation purposes. Please accept this letter as Monroe County's proposal to manage the property.

Background:

For the last several years the Monroe County Department of Marine Resources has recognized the potential for passive recreational use at the 'swimming hole' site, particularly due to the proximity to Pine Channel and US1. The site is already disturbed, which lends itself to low-impact limited development. A deep boat basin was dredged at the site decades ago and the site was scarified. Since that time invasive exotics were allowed to take over the uplands and the site remained unmanaged. Liveaboard boaters anchored in the adjacent waters have utilized the shoreline at the site for many years and have generated additional impacts. The site has been used as a dumping grounds for debris both upland and on the adjacent sovereign submerged lands.

In the last several years cleanup efforts have occurred, including the removal of debris from the site as well as the removal of the invasive exotics. Most recently the site was used as a rehabilitation area for stranded pilot whales. The results of all these activities is a cleaner site with fewer impacts from the liveaboard boaters in Pine Channel. At this time, however, the site still remains relatively void of vegetation and without a comprehensive plan for future utilization, management or improvements.

Identification of County and State Objectives:

Over the past year several years state and county entities have considered utilization of the 'swimming hole' site for a number overlapping objectives. The County Department of Marine Resources initially considered using the site as a shoreside facility for a mooring field for the adjacent liveaboard boaters. That objective was cited in the 2001 'Project Proposal for a Keys-

Wide Mooring Field System'. Although it has since been determined that under the CARL acquisition requirements the site would not be suitable for such a facility, the Department of Marine Resources recognizes that the site is, however, conducive to providing educational and environmental education to visiting boaters. Marine Resources staff and County Commissioner George Neugent met with CAMA manager Kacki Andrews at the 'swimming hole' in April 2002 to discuss the potential of Monroe County managing the site and Ms. Andrews was receptive to our objectives.

The Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail program, part of the DEP Division of Greenways & Trails, has also shown a strong interest in the 'swimming hole' parcel. The development of the bicycle trail includes trailheads to be located at strategic points along US1. FKOHT staff working for Monroe County (and funded by the state) and Florida Park Service staff have determined that the site at the foot of the bridge connecting Big Pine Key to Little Torch Key is optimal as a stopover for the Heritage Trail. This location provides a scenic water overlook as well as being proximate to one of the historic bridges.

The Monroe County Planning Department, as part of their current 'CommuniKeys' master plan has included a US1 Corridor Area Enhancement Plan for Big Pine Key. That plan, generated by input from the community, includes a passive recreational area at the 'swimming hole' site, including the state owned parcel on the north side of US1. The plan calls for limited parking on the northern parcel, with a walk-through underpass connecting pedestrians to the 'swimming hole' parcel. The Enhancement Plan shares objectives of the above mentioned entities, including: low-impact recreation with an emphasis on educational/historical components. The Enhancement Plan describes a resident-oriented amenity emphasizing environmental awareness, walkways, and sunset viewing.

Finally, a recent objective has been identified by the Florida Keys Discovery Program (and supported by Commissioner George Neugent) to relocate a historic house currently located in the interior of Big Pine Key to the 'swimming hole' site. The house, the oldest building in Big Pine Key, was used originally as a fishing cabin and is recognized by the Chamber of Commerce as historically significant. The relocation of the house to the 'swimming hole' site would provide an additional cultural and historical component to the project and may be use for display of photographs depicting Flagler's development of the Keys and the construction of the Overseas Railroad.

A Comprehensive Plan:

The above described objectives have been identified through communications with a variety of County and State staff. Projects which previously were being conducted separately are being coordinated to create a single proposal which encompasses overlapping objectives for the 'swimming hole' site. Those primary objectives include:

- 1) provide passive recreation to both residents and visitors
- 2) provide environmental education to the public
- 3) provide a cultural and historical component focusing on the Overseas Highway (previously the Overseas Railroad), and the Keys culture of the early 1900's
- 4) provide a scenic waterfront experience
- 5) provide a trailhead for bicyclists using the Overseas Heritage Trail

It is the desire of Monroe County, in cooperation with the State Office of Greenways & Trails, to lease the properties (both the swimming hole parcel and the adjacent parcel on the north side of US1) from the State and manage it for the State to create a small passive area open to the public for the public's enjoyment. The public area would provide only those amenities and structures necessary to fulfill the above outlined objectives.

Currently, the vision (see attached conceptual diagram) entails limited parking surrounded by native vegetative buffers on the north parcel connected to the 'swimming hole' parcel by a bicycle/pedestrian underpass. Access to the 'public area' would also be provided for non-motorized craft (i.e. kayaks, canoes) at the dredged basin. The bicycle trail head would be a dominant feature on the southern parcel adjacent to US1 providing location maps, benches, etc. Further from the highway would be narrow boardwalks winding through native hammock that would be planted, returning the site to it's natural state. Educational kiosks would be located along the boardwalks informing users of the vegetation and the fragile Keys ecology. A boardwalk would also be provided around the perimeter of the dredged basin and erosion controls would be implemented upgrading the walls of the basin. A small step-down floating dock would be installed, providing access for non-motorized craft. An observation tower is included in the vision, providing a 360 degree overlook of Big Pine Key, Pine Channel and the historic bridge. Information provided at the top of the tower would educate visitors on the history of the Keys, from the native Americans to Flagler to commercial fishing and finally tourism.

Numerous funding opportunities exist for this proposed project. Monroe County currently has funding for re-vegetating the northern parcel. The planting plan will be adapted to provide for the proposed parking area and underpass. The County Department of Marine Resources can acquire funding for any sovereign submerged lands needs adjacent to the basin. The Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail program will be a major source of funding for upland amenities (walkways, kiosks, etc.). Monroe County Planning Department and State Scenic Highway planners are prepared to begin on a comprehensive management plan for the project.

In closing I would like to express that this project is, and will continue to be a partnership between Monroe County and the State's Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail Program. Monroe County will be the lead player ensuring that residents and visitors are provided a low-impact public area with emphasis on conservation and education. I look forward to your review and comments on this proposal. Please do not hesitate to call if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

Richard Jones
Senior Planner
Department of Marine Resources.